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PROMOTION TECHNIQUES FOR PARK AND RECREATION ADMINISTRATORS

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ABSTRACT

A well-conceived promotion plan is based on carefully-targeted promotion goals and objectives and a promotion strategy tailor-made to meet those goals. There is an expansive shopping list of publicity, advertising, personal contact, and special promotion techniques available. Your job, as a park and recreation administrator, is to pick and choose those methods appropriate to your particular situation. This article discusses the propriety of promoting your agency and its facilities and services, it provides a quick overview of the promotion planning process, and it offers a brief introduction to the basics of publicity, advertising, personal contact, and special promotions.

PROMOTION TECHNIQUES FOR PARK AND RECREATION ADMINISTRATORS

Is promotion a dirty word? To some people it smacks of manipulation and snake oil. Actually, the true definition of promotion is to further the growth or establishment of something. The key to whether promotion is a worthy or unworthy pursuit lies in the value of the product being promoted and the morality or propriety of the promotion methods used. Few would dispute that furthering the growth or establishment of park and recreation programs and facilities is a worthy goal. This article provides a brief overview of the range of promotion techniques that may be applicable to public or non-profit park and recreation agencies. Pick and choose which methods are appropriate to your situation and which are not, keeping in mind that the public insists on the unadulterated truth in promotional activities of public agencies. There can be no trace of manipulation, and if a public agency overstates its case, the public feels misled and betrayed.

MARKETING ANALYSIS AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Promotion is just one part of an orchestrated marketing program. Before any promotion planning is done, it is essential to determine the park and recreation needs of the people in your service area and to carefully analyze the effectiveness of your programs and facilities in meeting those needs. You also need to assess the strengths and weaknesses of other park and recreation providers in your area. Next you need to develop a strategy for offering services that yields the optimum facility and program mix, ideally distributed through your service area, with the proper pricing structure.

Only after these prerequisite steps are taken should you begin designing your promotion program. If you fail to do your homework and begin promoting a substandard program or facility, you may succeed only in increasing the number of people having a less-than-satisfactory experience and in speeding up bad word-of-mouth advertising. You could be paying for this mistake for years.

IDENTIFICATION OF PROMOTION GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The overall goal of your promotion program should be to encourage the public to derive full benefit from the services you are providing. This means striving to achieve full utilization of your programs and facilities by all segments of the population you are serving. To enable yourself to properly target your promotion efforts, you must carefully analyze present and projected use figures for each program and facility and for each segment of the population. You may find that you need to direct your promotion activities toward:

- * currently underutilized facilities or programs,
- * new facilities or programs that you expect to be underutilized unless they are promoted,
- * certain groups who rarely use your facilities,
- * or more likely a combination of these.

After identifying what and/or who should be targeted for priority attention, determine why the public, or certain segments of the public, are underutilizing your services. Examine their attitudes toward your agency and the services it provides.

- * Are they unaware of some or all of your services?
- * Do they have a positive attitude toward your services, but just haven't gotten around to trying them out?
- * Do some of your facilities and programs have a bad reputation?

* Does your agency have a less than dazzling image which fails to attract users or even discourages the public from trying out your services?

Refer to the information obtained through your needs assessment and fill in any information gaps by conducting additional interviews, public meetings, workshops, and/or surveys as needed.

Once you have established why the public is not taking full advantage of the services being provided, you must determine how your promotion program can most effectively encourage a change in public attitudes that will result in full utilization of your services. Promotion techniques can be used to accomplish any of the following functions:

* TO INFORM the public of the services you are providing. This is the most accepted role of promotion;

* TO REMIND users of the benefits they are deriving from the use of your programs and facilities;

* TO FAMILIARIZE the public with your agency and its services to reduce the fear of the unknown and to make them feel comfortable and secure with the thought of using your services;

* TO OVERCOME INERTIA by encouraging people to do things that they know would benefit them, but that they haven't done because the rewards for doing them are long-term and the cost of doing them is immediate. For example, staying in good physical condition can be very beneficial, but adopting a regular exercise program is not always easy. Through the use of promotion techniques, the potential benefits can be vividly portrayed, helping the potential user to accept the "costs" more willingly; and

* TO ADD PERCEIVED VALUE to your program or facilities by associating it with favorable images and concepts. Although the service is the same as before the promotion occurs, it is perceived to be more valuable than before by the user. This is the most controversial function of promotion.

Some feel that it is inappropriate for park and recreation agencies to try to persuade the public to utilize their services and that their promotional messages should be strictly informational. However, implicit in every communication identifying park and recreation opportunities is the notion that the agency considers the opportunity to be worthwhile. In attempting to design a perfectly straight-forward informational message containing no hint of persuasion, the message's author is caught in a dilemma. Language is not sterile. Words carry positive and negative connotations. The message's author is forced to select from a variety of different ways to describe the service being offered, some more appealing and persuasive than others.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who feel that advocacy advertising is an entirely appropriate pursuit for public park and recreation agencies. They cite public education campaigns designed to prevent forest fires, reduce litter, and encourage water and energy conservation as examples of universally accepted efforts to persuade as well as inform the public. There is no clearcut answer to what types of promotion park and recreation agencies should or should not engage in. It is up to you to set the tone of your promotional campaign so that it reflects the balance you find to be appropriate between bland, unnoticed announcements and slick, manipulatory sales pitches.

Once you have identified promotion objectives for each of your priority targets, circulate them for review, input, and hopefully staff consensus. Keep in mind that a good promotion program can be successful in not only generating goodwill in the community, but also in building staff morale.

DEVELOPMENT OF A PROMOTION STRATEGY

Promotion techniques fall into four major categories: publicity, advertising, personal contact, and special promotions. Each has its strengths and weaknesses and is particularly suitable for accomplishing certain promotion goals. A well-designed promotion program blends together a creative promotion mix of complementary techniques. Carefully match each promotion objective with the techniques or combination of techniques likely to yield the best results.

Sometimes an overall theme is selected to tie all of your agency promotion together and help them to build upon each other. Prominent examples include the use of slogans, logos, shoulder patches, mascots, and the use of a distinctive style of sign at all of your facilities. A less noticeable example is the consistent use of a particular lettering type in all agency brochures and other written communications. Developing such themes establishes name recognition for your agency and gives it an identity in the public's eyes and in the eyes of the elected officials holding the purse strings.

Ready yourself to implement your promotion by preparing a promotion calendar for the budget year that sets target dates for completing key steps and assigns responsibility for each major task. Preparing a detailed calendar will force you to carefully plan every aspect of your promotion program. A promotion calendar will also enable you to track your progress as the year unfolds, and it will help to avoid misunderstandings over what is expected of whom. Distribute the calendar to the staff and provide them with amendments during the year if significant changes are made.

IMPLEMENTATION OF YOUR PROMOTION PROGRAM

Following is a quick glimpse at how to use publicity, advertising, personal contact, and special promotions techniques to implement your promotion strategy. If you are serious about implementing a well-conceived promotion program, the following ideas will give you a start, but you would be well advised to pursue these subjects in more depth.

Publicity

Publicity is non-sponsored media communication that brings a person, place, or cause to the attention of the public. Common types of publicity are news stories, human interest feature stories, and other items in newspapers, radio, television, and magazines.

For many organizations, publicity, whether good or bad, is something that happens to them. For an organization well-versed in the inner workings of the media, publicity becomes something which is sought or avoided. Although free publicity cannot be controlled the way advertising can, it can be encouraged or discouraged.

The first step toward encouraging positive publicity is the identification of media contacts. Compile separate contact lists for all of the various types of media that you want to publicize your programs (e.g. local and regional newspapers, local radio and television news reporters and producers and public affairs producers, columnists and commentators who might be sent small items on a rotating basis). Also prepare one small, select contact list for those who should receive every public relation item you disseminate.

Once your contact lists are prepared, refer to your promotion goals and objectives and set priorities for the types of publicity to be sought. If the public is generally unaware of your services or if your agency suffers from a negative public image, you may want to attract as much publicity as possible for all of your programs and facilities. However, you may have certain events or new or underutilized facilities and programs toward which you want to attract special media attention.

Sending out well written press releases to comprehensive contact lists is one of the best ways to gain publicity. But there is more that you can do to enhance your chances for positive publicity. Build and nurture relationships with reporters, editors, and producers. Come to understand their needs and provide them with the types of stories that will appeal to their audiences in a form that they can readily use.

Target key media people to receive personal follow-up visits or phone calls. This will give you an opportunity to make a direct pitch for your story. Choosing who to target is an important step which should not be taken lightly. A little detective work may be needed to determine

who can do something about getting your story printed or aired and who is likely to be more receptive and friendly to you and your story.

Be well-prepared when you contact the media. Have a fact-sheet available to aid you in responding to any questions. To "sell" your story you must convince your media contact that your story is newsworthy, your story would be ideal for their particular format, your story would be interesting to their audiences, and you will provide intelligent, interesting spokespersons.

Advertising

"Plop, plop, fizz, fizz"—you know what advertising is. You are bombarded with hundreds of advertisements every day. Advertising is media communication in which the sponsor is identified. Unlike publicity, there is usually a fee for advertising, although it is sometimes waived such as in the case of public service announcements. Common media used in advertising are newspapers, radio, television, outdoor billboards, posters, transit signs, magazines, shopping guides, the telephone yellow pages, theater screens, direct mail, leaflets, and recreation program schedule brochures.

Refer again to your promotion goals and objectives and set priorities on the types of advertising to be produced. Advertising offers many of the same features as publicity, but it is more controllable. You can carefully plan an advertising campaign aimed at informing the public about targeted programs, facilities, or events; or you can direct your advertising toward improving or highlighting the image of your agency.

Beware of advertising a facility or program of questionable quality. Advertising cannot sell a poorly delivered service more than once. By encouraging use of a service before its deficiencies are remedied, you will make it harder to build a favorable reputation even after the problems have been ironed out.

Media selection is a two-step process. First, intermedia comparisons should be made to determine which broad classes of media (newspapers, radio, television, etc.) should be used to meet your priority advertising objectives. Next, intramedia comparisons should be made to identify the best media choices within each of the broad classes selected. For example, if radio is the media type selected, the radio stations received in your area should then be compared to determine which are to be used in your advertising campaign.

The objective of the media selection process is to match your target audience with the most cost-effective media combination that will successfully reach them. There are five major factors to consider in

making this judgment:

REACH -- The number of persons exposed to the advertising messages through the media.

FREQUENCY -- The number of times a person is exposed to the advertising messages through the medium.

DELIVERY -- The ability of the medium to expose people at a time and place where they are receptive to the message.

SELECTIVITY -- The ability of the medium to target a desired audience for exposure to the message.

EFFICIENCY -- The ability to provide reach, frequency, delivery, and selectivity at the lowest possible price.

The main consideration in the media selection process is usually the REACH a medium has. A medium's reach can be discussed not only in terms of the total number of people exposed, but also in terms of the number possessing particular socio-economic characteristics or residing in a particular geographic area. All media sales representatives have plenty of demographic and survey information on the reach of their communication vehicle.

An adequate FREQUENCY assures that not only is the target audience exposed to the message, but that they are reminded of the message enough times that they overcome their inertia and act on the message.

In some situations DELIVERY and SELECTIVITY can be extremely significant factors. The circumstances of delivery are particularly important when the message is complicated and requires the full attention of the audience. Selectivity can be the overriding factor if you need to reach a very specific clientele.

EFFICIENCY is also very important. However, if a particular medium is not capable of reaching a large enough audience to effectively broadcast your message, it will not fully satisfy your communication needs regardless of how efficient it is. If this is the case, consider using it in conjunction with another medium with a larger reach.

PERSONAL CONTACT

The personal nature of direct interaction with the public makes it extremely effective in either building or damaging the image of your agency and its programs and facilities. Personal contact often provides an opportunity:

- * to welcome the public and help them fully enjoy your programs and facilities;

- * to inform, remind, or convince them of the benefits of

participating in your programs and using your facilities; and

* to monitor the effectiveness of your services by receiving feedback from users and nonusers.

If any of these functions are being neglected, you are not only missing a golden opportunity to promote your agency, but you may also be generating ill-will which will make future promotional efforts much more difficult.

All members of your park and recreation staff need training and guidance in user relations, including maintenance crews, security personnel, playground leaders, guides, entry attendants, and concessionaires. Their appearance, their attitude to users and other staff members, and their approach to dealing with complaints, requests, and emergencies can be critical in determining how the public views your agency. Identify common problem situations and train your employees to be able to effectively deal with them. There is often more than one way to successfully handle a user-relation problem, but try to demonstrate possible promising options. Then encourage discussion and utilize role playing to reinforce the techniques being discussed.

Your employees must also be well-informed so that they can properly assist users. Give serious thought to what information each of your agency's employees should be able to provide the public. What should your maintenance personnel be aware of? Your playground leaders? Your entry attendants?

SPECIAL PROMOTIONS

Special promotions include such promotional techniques as offering incentives, "advertising specialties," contests, and special events. To be successful, a special promotion must be well-planned, have realistic objectives, have an adequate budget, and be designed with the target market in mind. It must also match and support your agency's image.

INCENTIVES are something of financial value offered to encourage participation in a program or use of a facility or service. Some of the most commonly used incentives are the waiving of fees, price reductions, and coupons. Incentives can be used to:

- * encourage the sampling of existing facilities and programs;
- * introduce a new facility or program;
- * encourage the use of underutilized programs or facilities;
- * level off uneven use patterns by encouraging use at non-peak

times of the day, days of the week, or seasons of the year;

* introduce a new use for an existing facility;

* develop a pattern of use that carries on after the incentive has been removed;

* add interest and excitement to your advertising;

* test the effectiveness of the media you selected for your advertising;

* create publicity; and

* generate goodwill and enhance your overall agency image.

An "ADVERTISING SPECIALTY" is a piece of merchandise given freely, without condition, that bears an advertising imprint. Common "advertising specialties" are ball-point pens, pencils, calendars, matchbooks, and key chains. The following considerations should be weighed in selecting an "advertising specialty":

* The item should be highly useful to the recipient--preferably subject to repeat daily use;

* It should be of sufficient quality and proper type to reflect favorably on the image of your agency;

* It should be long-lasting;

* It should have an imprint that not only repeatedly puts the name of your agency before the public, but also contains a message that furthers the positive image of the agency and/or communicates important information;

* And it should appeal to the target audience that you want to reach, and ideally to as few others as possible to avoid "waste."

CONTESTS are used to create publicity and/or to add interest to your advertising. Before creating a sweepstakes or contest, it is important that state and federal regulations be examined.

SPECIAL EVENTS often have a dual purpose. The more obvious purpose is to gather people together to have a good time, but they also can be designed to promote a specific facility or program or to enhance the image of the park and recreation agency sponsoring the event. By offering exciting, non-routine attractions, the agency is able to introduce or reintroduce people to a facility or activity in the hope that they will return after the event is over to make use of the featured facility or program or other agency services on an ongoing basis.

SUMMARY

You needn't feel uneasy about the propriety of promoting your park and recreation agency and its facilities and services. If you approach the development of a promotion plan with the same professionalism and attention to detail that you give your other responsibilities, your promotion program will serve the public well. Just remember that a well-conceived promotion plan is based on carefully-targeted promotion goals and objectives and a promotion strategy tailor-made to meet those goals. There is an expansive shopping list of publicity, advertising, personal contact, and special promotion techniques available. Your job is to pick and choose those methods appropriate to your situation.

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1. J. B. Goldsmith, The Power of Promotion, Marketing Parks and Recreation, Venture Publishing, State College, Pennsylvania, 1983.